

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the 2007–2008 school year, almost 6,000 elementary students in 31 schools and 22 districts participated in Montana Reading First. Of these schools, 12 were in their third and final year of full grant funding (cohort 2); they also received regular professional development and technical assistance from state project staff members. The remaining 19 schools that continued Reading First implementation were in cohort 1. For the past two years they received reduced funding, invitations to participate in professional development opportunities, and site visits and technical assistance from the state.

The 2007–2008 evaluation of Montana Reading First found evidence of program implementation and sustainability in all areas of the program and continued growth in student achievement.

Professional Development

Montana Reading First provided multiple opportunities for cohort 1 and 2 principals and coaches to participate in professional development. The majority of cohort 2 principals and coaches attended most of these meetings. Staff members found the meetings to be of high quality and relevance and to provide time to network with colleagues; however, coaches thought they addressed observing, feedback, and working with resistance more so than principals did.

Cohort 1 coaches attended meetings more frequently than principals, but both attended these meetings more often than last year. Overall, these staff members were pleased with the quality of training in instructional leadership and coaching. Cohort 2 district coordinators were more likely to attend, and appreciate, meetings with the state reading specialist assigned to their district than to attend the principal and coach meetings.

Reading First schools were visited (generally three times during the year) by their state reading specialist who provided technical assistance, met with staff, conducted observations, and reviewed materials and data. Cohort 2 school staff members found their state reading specialists to be supportive, trustworthy, and understanding; but cohort 1 coaches reported their visits as slightly less helpful than the previous year.

Teachers in cohort 2 schools participated in site-based professional development in summer 2007. They received on-going, classroom-related professional development primarily from their coach, but also from participation in study groups on Overcoming Dyslexia, and somewhat through use of Knowledge Box. Some teachers received training from district reading staff members and publisher representatives. Cohort 2 teachers' perceptions of formal training and coaching were positive, but less so than last year. While an increased proportion of teachers reported that they were frequently observed by their coach, not all teachers were.

Cohort 1 teachers continued to report receiving less reading-related professional development; however their perceptions of its quality remained positive. The frequency by which they were observed by their coach decreased.

Leadership and School Structures

Cohort 2 district coordinators reported strong support from the state in their implementation of Reading First. Likewise, cohort 2 Reading First schools reported sufficient support from their districts. Most cohort 1 principals agreed that their district supported the continuation of Reading First and that no district programs clashed with it.

Montana Reading First cohort 2 principals and coaches continued to fill the roles assigned to them. Principals conducted walkthroughs, but were challenged in finding time to regularly conduct them and provide feedback. Coaches continued to spend about a third of their time coaching; compared to last year, less time was dedicated to working with data and more was devoted to interventions.

Cohort 1 principals continued to regularly observe most teachers' classrooms, although the frequency of providing feedback has decreased. The majority of the cohort 1 schools maintain full-time coaches; four schools do not even have a part-time coach. Fewer teachers in schools with coaches report being regularly observed. Coaches reported spending slightly less time coaching.

Data systems in cohort 2 appeared to be better established for benchmark than for progress-monitoring assessments; not all teachers have assumed responsibility for administering progress-monitoring assessments. Data were used by the majority of staff members for a variety of tasks; however, they were used habitually by coaches, less often by teachers, and less, still, by principals.

All cohort 1 schools administered the DIBELS three times a year, and, according to coaches, progress-monitoring was more regular this year compared to last. The use of data for some purposes by principals and teachers declined from last spring.

Most cohort 2 principals, coaches, and teachers regularly attended Reading Leadership Team and grade-level meetings. Teachers' perceptions of collaboration, and their trust of colleagues, were mixed. While two cohort 1 schools discontinued Reading Leadership Teams, schools that do have them meet monthly. Attendance at grade-level meetings appears regular.

Reading First Instruction and Interventions

All of the cohort 2 schools selected and used a research-based core reading program. Most school staff members were satisfied with their core program and understood Montana Reading First's expectations for fidelity and use of approved modifications including lesson maps and templates. There was a slight decline in the percentage of cohort 1 schools reporting use of the previous year's core curriculum.

In cohort 2 schools, the majority of the reading blocks were of appropriate length and were uninterrupted. Nearly all of the observed instruction in visited cohort 2 schools focused on the five components of reading. A variety of strategies and techniques were observed in the instruction of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension. Vocabulary lessons were infrequently observed. Almost all of the observed lessons were clear; the vast majority appropriately included modeling, guided questions, and opportunities to practice meaningful skills. Cohort 2 teachers, in the majority of classrooms, monitored student understanding, adjusted the lesson, and provided feedback. Student engagement was strong in half of the observed classrooms.

The use of walk-to-read, paraprofessional support, and small groups allowed cohort 2 teachers to differentiate during the reading block. While one in five teachers reported not having access to paraprofessional support, an inability to use small groups, and not differentiating during the reading block, interview data did provide some evidence of differentiation occurring outside of the reading block during universal access time.

About half of all cohort 2 students were provided interventions; an increased percentage of coaches indicated their school

was serving all of their struggling readers in interventions. On average, interventions were delivered to groups of five students, most frequently by paraprofessionals and teachers. While interventions materials met the needs of all students according to coaches, a smaller proportion of teachers agreed. The staffing and training of intervention providers continued to present challenges in schools.

About 60 percent of cohort 1 students were provided interventions. Coaches and teachers continued to remain positive about the number of students served and the training of intervention providers, although coaches perceptions declined slightly from last year.

Student Outcomes

By spring 2008, the majority of Montana Reading First students were at benchmark, including 80 percent of kindergarten students, 74 percent of first-grade students, 64 percent of second-grade students, and 60 percent of third-grade students. These percentages represented statistically significant gains from fall 2007 at all grade levels. These trends are true in both cohorts.

Since spring 2004, trends indicate that increased percentages of Montana Reading First students met benchmark and decreased percentages of students had intensive instructional support recommendations, at almost every grade level. Furthermore, for an intact group of students who began kindergarten in 2005 and finished third grade in 2008, larger proportions of children achieved benchmark each year than children in the same grades in spring 2004. Overall, Montana Reading First was found to be effective for 73 percent of these students.

Montana Reading First was most successful in closing the achievement gap between white and American Indian students. It reduced that gap at all grade levels, except second, and virtually closed it in cohort 2. However, while the percentage of special education students at the intensive level declined from fall to spring in every grade, it grew larger from kindergarten to third grade, such that, by spring 2008, slightly more than half of students eligible for special education were still at the intensive level.

Sustainability

Cohort 1 schools continued to sustain many required components of the program, including assessments, grade-level meetings, and interventions. Several components—the 90-minute reading block, the core program, and Reading Leadership Team (RLT) meetings—were implemented with slightly less fidelity in Year 5. Since spring 2006, the frequency of coaching, professional development for teachers, and teachers' use of data declined.

Based on the experiences of cohort 1 and other evaluation data, it appears that cohort 2 will face some challenges in sustaining Reading First. Cohort 2 district coordinators, principals and teachers reported less support for the continuation of Reading First, compared to those in cohort 1. Additionally, compared to cohort 1, fewer schools may have coach support in 2008–2009. These differences may overcome the strengths that cohort 2 brings to continuation. These strengths most notably include state, district, principal, and coach support; low staff member turnover; established systems and habits; and demonstrated student success.

